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17 to 22

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Summary

She loves you, but she'll never love you how you want her to.

The first thing Yongsun does when she joins the company is steal Byulyi away. Like a fucking pied piper whistling a jaunty tune, all she does is laugh and Byulyi is at her side, following her like a woman entranced.

She's perfect, Byulyi had told her after a week. She's so funny, and she's cute. Did you know she's older than me? Only by a year, but her visuals are no joke. She's a little slow at learning how to dance but once she gets them down she just owns them. She loves joking around too, you know, and she acts like a fool sometimes but that totally just adds to her charm. God, have you heard her sing yet? She hasn't even had any training before! Her voice must be a gift from angels.

Despite Byulyi going for the hard sell, Wheein is still not keen on the new trainee. Her teacher had once told her she was a lot sharper than she looks. Wheein thinks that she's the only one that can see what's really going on with this Yongsun character.

Wheein is just as good of a singer, she's a better dancer, she's younger, and now, she thinks Byulyi's sense of humor is probably a little off. Yongsun is new, the novelty will wear off soon.

She wasn't that special, Wheein decided.

Despite that, she stares every time Yongsun walks into the room.

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A month later, everyone is still all googly-eyed over Yongsun, like she is the actual sun, like where she walks, flowers bloom. Wheein watches everyone gravitate towards her like magnets, like she's candy, like she's all things irresistible.

“Why don’t you just talk to her sometime?” Hyejin asks her one day over lunch.

Wheein deflates, the food in her mouth suddenly bitter. “What, are you in love with her too?”

Hyejin fixes her with a look that makes her feel a little guilty for snapping. “No, I’m just not obsessed with hating her for no reason.”

“I don’t hate her, I just don’t think we can get along.”

“For no reason.”

“I have my reasons!” Wheein slams her chopsticks on the table, making Hyejin flinch at the sudden force.

Wheein pulls back, mumbling a small sorry. Hyejin sighs too, knowing she pushed a little too much.

“Look Wheein, I know it’s hard for you to get along with new people, but I think the CEO really has high hopes for our group, and that includes Yongsun now. We’ve been here longer, you should talk to her first.”

“She seemed to have talked to Byulie-unnie just fine.” Wheein mutters.

There’s a moment of silence that Hyejin takes to scrutinize her friend, eyes narrowing, then widening in amusement.

“Wait, are you jealous?”

“No!”

“You’re jealous that everyone else warmed up to her and you can’t even talk to her!”

“I’m telling you that’s not it!” Wheein tries to grab Hyejin to shove a foot in her mouth or something, anything to shut her up.

Hyejin grapples with the smaller girl for a good while before pinning her wrists down, looming victorious. “I don’t know why you’re always picking fights you can’t win. Oh, like the argument we were just having. You want Yongsun-unnie to notice you.”

“I don’t!” Wheein struggles a bit in her grip before relenting with a pout.

“How long have I known you, Wheeinie?”

“Four years.”

“I can read you like a book.”

“You can’t even read.”

Hyejin pauses, sighs and gets up, leaving the other girl to mope on the ground. “Whatever. The point is you don’t hate Yongsun-unnie and you should pull your face out of your ass and talk to her.”

A groan floats in the air from where Wheein is lying down. *I want to.*

“I just feel like I can’t.”

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"I don't think Wheein likes me very much. Or at all." Yongsun admits, fiddling with her toes.

Byulyi pauses in the middle of her sip and raises an eyebrow.

"I mean, she hasn't talked to me yet and it's been a few weeks. Also whenever our eyes catch she's like," Yongsun's face falls from worried to stoic like the flip of a coin. Byulyi giggles. "I want to be a good leader, and the CEO told me to look after them. They're only 17 Byul-ah. Hyejin is strong, but sometimes...I wish Wheein would depend on me a little, hopeless as I am." Yongsun admits.

"They trust you, Yongsun. You haven't given them any reason to doubt, and you won't. I believe in you. Wheein is way more shy than she seems, you just have to approach her first." Byulyi advises. "Though you are pretty weird. She's probably just intimidated by your weirdness."

Yongsun's eyebrows furrow. "Am I really that weird?"

Byulyi shrugs. "Hyejin said you were. Hyejin can't tell lies."

"I thought Hyejin liked me..." Yongsun deflates. Will she ever be able to bridge the gap with the younger girls?

"Oh she does." Byulyi pats her back reassuringly. "Hyejin likes weird people."

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Wheein shoves her shoes and extra socks back into her bag, a little too roughly. Ever since Yongsun had been assigned the head of the group she's been irritable. Not that it was a position that she thought she deserved herself, but, well, Byulyi was there, even if she didn't want to, and Sujung was there, even if she said she was leaving, and any number of other reasons Wheein could give because she would rather just have anyone else. Instead she was subject to staring at Yongsun's back all day, hearing her voice bounce around the room, seeing her smile kindly in the reflection in the mirror...it made Wheein feel uncomfortable in ways she couldn't place why.

But she definitely couldn't concentrate. She was a mess, and after a whole week of screwing up because she was distracted by Yongsun, the devil herself asked if they could talk after practice.

Great, Wheein grimaced to herself, their first real conversation would be a lecture. She zipped up her bag and stared at the backs of her hands. Should she go over to Yongsun? Or wait for the older girl to come get her?

Wheein sighed. Since when did she become so passive?

She jumps with a yelp at the tap on her shoulder, whisking around to see that Yongsun is almost just as surprised as she is at her outburst. She feels her face get hot.

"Wheein...have you been feeling alright?" Yongsun moves to brush the stray hairs from crowding Wheein's face but stops herself when she sees the younger girl's expression. Still guarded. She puts her hand back down to her side.

"I'm fine." Wheein rubs her arm and looks away.

Yongsun's eyebrows furrow, getting a little impatient. "You've been distracted all week." She says firmly. "I can't have you failing the monthly evaluation, so you need to tell me what's wrong."

Wheein shrinks at the scolding. Yongsun wasn't wrong, but she couldn't just say the truth to her face. *You. You are what's wrong with me.*

"There's nothing wrong, just one of those weeks, y'know." She lies.

Wheein feels a warm aura before soft fingers press on her arm, rubbing up and down, thumb massaging her slightly. It shocks her for a moment but she relaxes again at the calm motion. Where Yongsun touches leaves a tingling feeling, like her body numbing, like she wants to feel more.

"You're looking thinner than usual," Yongsun appraises. "We're on diets but you're still a growing girl. Ah, but we can't go out and get food..." Yongsun thinks out loud. Her lip juts out and it's a certain plumpness that makes Wheein want to bite it.

She blinks the thought away.

"I'm not hungry Unnie --"

"Don't lie," Wheein feels her stomach drop at those words. "We can't go out to eat, but how about you come over and I make you something, yeah?" Yongsun smiles at her, warm and inviting and Wheein's insides feel like they're melting, spilling out, leaving her a husk and so she must've lost her brain too, because she nods dumbly and lets the older girl lead her away.

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"Wheein, eat up, don't be shy. I made lots for us." Yongsun pushes the bowl closer to her.

Wheein looks down at the black sauce and rice, its aroma tickling her nose, and when Yongsun leans over to grab a spoon she truly starts feeling nauseous.

"Here," Yongsun picks the bowl up and takes a scoop, bringing it in close to Wheein's face. She's practically hovering over Wheein's lap and if the younger girl were to look past the bowl she would be able to see right down Yongsun's loose v-neck.

"I'll feed you, say 'ahh'." Yongsun says kindly, encouraging, and the situation makes Wheein want to scream.

She opens her mouth and blurts out "I have to go," dashing out the door before her frustration spills out of her eyes again.

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"Yongsun-unnie keeps trying to talk to me."

Byulyi looks up from her writing desk and gives Wheein an amused smile. "What's wrong with that?"

"She's too nice." Wheein blurts out. There's a moment of silence. Byulyi's easy expression falls.

"Is there something wrong with that?" Byulyi's questions, testing, and it's then Wheein realizes this is another one of those times she let her thoughts loose too soon. Why didn't she ever think when it came to Yongsun?

"I just --" Wheein tries but a sigh interrupts her.

Byulyi leans back and runs a hand through her hair, suddenly tired. "Look, Wheein. I know people just aren't compatible sometimes, but Yongsun hasn't done anything wrong and you're barely even

being civil with her. You're both great people, my best friends, and Yongsun has been trying with you. You can at least acknowledge her." Byulyi tries to catch Wheein's eyes but the younger girl is steadfastly avoiding contact. "This isn't like you."

An awkward silence hangs in the air. Byulyi doesn't know what else to say, and Wheein has been at a loss of words for a long while now. She knows she's fucked up for real when even Byulyi is lecturing her. Her older sister card was no joke.

"Wheein," Byulyi starts again, "You wanna tell me what's actually wrong?"

Wheein clenched her jaw. Just because she couldn't get along with one person. Why was everyone acting like she was being absurd? Byulyi had been taking Yongsun's side since day one and Wheein should have known better than to talk to the other girl about it.

Yongsun Yongsun Yongsun. And since when did Byulyi start calling her just 'Yongsun' anyway?

Did Yongsun allow Byulyi into her world, where they stood side by side, instead of looking down with pitying kindness?

"I'll figure it out myself, don't mind me." She stomps away, weirdly frustrated again, leaving an appalled Byulyi in her wake.

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"Byulie-unnie told me you told her you don't like Yongsun-unnie."

"Oh, so you're all gossips now?"

Hyejin's face falls at the comment and Wheein backpedals. "I'm sorry, Hyejinie I didn't mean that. I'm just tired of this situation."

Hyejin folds her arms. "You know I don't mean anything by this, but this so called "situation" is your fault."

"Well it's *not* my fault she had to show up here like she's perfect." Wheein feels her stress rising again. "She didn't have to come in stealing the main vocal spot, or becoming the leader, telling me what to do and scrutinizing me even if it is her job! She doesn't have to be so blindly nice to me! She doesn't have to act like I'm a kid and she has to take care of me like she's my mother or something!"

Hyejin's mouth hangs open at Wheein's outburst.

"She acts like that with you too. She thinks we're children." Wheein heaves.

All of the sudden Hyejin bursts out laughing and Wheein feels ready to slap her, four years of friendship be damned.

"Duh she thinks we're children? She five years older than us." Hyejin tilts her head like, once again, Wheein is the one being absurd. "We can't even drink yet. Like, it's frustrating sometimes but I get it? Even Byulie-unnie does it, we're like the age of her little sister."

"It's different with Byul-unnie."

"Why is it different?"

"It just is, I don't know."

Hyejin shrugs, pushing off the wall she'd been leaning on. "Right. Look, I like to think we're adults too, but someone five years younger than us is only twelve. They can't get around looking at us like we're young because we just *are* ." Hyejin puts her hands on Wheein's shoulders. "And I know I said this weird tension between you two is your fault, but it's partly also Yongsun-unnie."

Wheein's perks up at that and Hyejin pauses, curious about Wheein's behavior. Did she dislike Yongsun or not?

"Byul-unnie told me Yongsun-unnie's been really worried about how you don't like her. It's like, actually stressing her out. Oh, it's too late to look guilty now Wheeinie, you been off your rocker for months." Hyejin says, seeing the shame on Wheein's face. "I don't know what you're thinking, but I know for a fact she spends a lot of time wondering how she can be closer to you. Didn't she invite you to her house that one time?"

"That's just because I was fucking up at practice."

Hyejin rolled her eyes. "Okay, but whenever I fuck up she gives me a 'stern lecture' ." Hyejin air-quotes. "She doesn't treat me to a home-cooked meal. That's some special service, just for you."

Just for me. Wheein's mind is floating, her chest constricting.

"I don't like jjampong though." She argues.

"Maybe if you talked to her she would know that."

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"Wheein."

Wheein jumps at the voice. She's too afraid to turn around, knowing who it belongs too, but Yongsun has no problem running around in front of her.

She smiles, warm and pretty as always, her eyes like glittering crescents and Wheein feels like she's struggling to breathe.

"Wheein," Yongsun says again, the name whistling out of her mouth like a song just by itself. "Let's sing together, for this month's evaluation."

As if Wheein wasn't already thrown off by the sudden interaction, the question leaves her baffled. And like always when Yongsun asks something of her, she nods slowly, entranced, like she has would never be able to refuse.

Yongsun's grin dips at the lack of enthusiasm, but at least Wheein didn't reject her. She hands her the paper she was holding. "Here are some songs I think would be good for us. You can pick one and we'll practice it tomorrow, okay?"

We'll do anything you want, Wheein. I'll spoil you like this . Wheein reads between Yongsun's kindness. She feels a prickling of tears in her eyes at the thought, so she grabs the paper and dashes out leaving only a meek 'okay bye' in her wake.

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"You do this part really well Wheein."

"Wheein! That was so good. You tone really caught the mood of the song."

“Wheein can you sing it for me one more time? Oh, you didn’t do anything wrong, I just want to make sure.”

“How about this Wheein? What if we did it like this instead...”

Yongsun grins around her name one more time before Wheein slams her hands on the keyboard in front of them, the building humiliation tipping over at last.

“Just because I’m younger than you,” Wheein seethes, “doesn’t mean you have to treat me like this.”

Yongsun falters. “Wheein what –“

“Stop treating me like a kid.” Wheein says, the loudest she’s ever spoken to Yongsun. The older girl blinks her eyes, wide and confused. “Treat me like an equal, please.”

Yongsun deflates, her bright image crumbling, the realization of her own actions suddenly hitting her. “I – I’m sorry Wheein I didn’t realize I was sounding condescending to you, I should have known better than to butter my words I just wanted us to get along. I’ll be more straightforward.” She frantically apologizes.

“So you’ll acknowledge me?”

Yongsun’s soft eyes melt Wheein’s frustration, and she curses herself for being so easy. “Of course, I’ve always acknowledged you Wheein-ah, I’m sorry if it didn’t seem like that.”

Wheein-ah.

This. This is what Wheein thought she wanted to hear from Yongsun since the beginning. That they were on the same level, that Yongsun didn’t exist in a place Wheein couldn’t reach. That she should be respected.

Why didn’t it make her feel better?

“This isn’t what I wanted.” Wheein realizes, clenching the fabric of her pants, searching Yongsun’s face.

Yongsun panics, at a loss. “I’m sorry Wheein I don’t know what you mean, then. You know I’m a little slow sometimes if you don’t tell me I – “

Wheein leans in gently, cutting her off, and Yongsun barely has time to cross her eyes before she feels a soft pressure against her lips, and it’s gone again before she can even blink.

Yongsun’s expression afterwards isn’t happy, but it at least it isn’t disgusted, Wheein muses, even though her resolve is shattering at the lack of reaction. The clock ticks three times before she bolts upwards ready to run home.

A hand shoots out to grab her wrist and drags her back down into her chair. She falls right back into it and makes the mistake of seeing Yongsun’s expression.

It’s all she needs to feel her heart wither.

“Wheein,” Yongsun says. Her voice is stern. She’s not even blushing, her grip unshaking, and there’s a hint of sadness in her eyes.

Don’t say it, please don’t say it.

“Oh, Wheein...”

You said you acknowledged me. You said you didn't think I was a kid.

“You know I can't see you like that.”

Maybe it was childish for her to hope in the first place.

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